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MAHATHIR-MICRO-CREDIT

MICRO-CREDIT EMPOWERS WOMEN, SAYS MAHATHIR

KUALA LUMPUR, Sept 26 (Bernama) -- Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad says that while micro-credit facility programmes have raised the capacity of rural women to achieve economic empowerment within their homes, villages and communities, there is increasing evidence from the Asia Pacific region to show the overriding influence of gender ideology on the lives of these women borrowers.

Nevertheless, the Prime Minister said studies from four micro-credit programmes in Bangladesh showed that on the average, 39 percent of women clients had little or no control over the use of their loans.

"There are cases whereby women apply for loans on behalf of their husbands and end up paying the debts," he said in his speech at the second meeting of the regional steering committee on the advancement of rural and island women - Asia Pacific region (RSC-AP).

However, in Malaysia, he said the government has taken steps to ensure the removal of gender obstacles.

"The success of Amanah Ikhtiar Malaysia, with financial allocation of RM200 million as a lending facility, is an example of the government's sensitivity to the role and needs of rural women.

The government's allocation of RM50 million to implement smart partnership projects on women with women NGOs (non-governmental organisations) was another case in point, he added.

"Further efforts must be undertaken to ensure gender mainstreaming, of which gender budgeting will be top priority," the Prime Minister said.

Since 1992, he said that the International Steering Committee as well as the RSC-AP have put in special efforts calling for political commitment of the national governments, to target rural women in poverty eradication programmes.

Following the awareness, there is an increase in the number of micro-credit institutions in the region.

According to the data on the follow-up of Micro-credit summit in 1997 worldwide, 14 million of the world's poorest families are being reached by 1,065 micro-credit institutions compared to eight million in 1997.

Rural women, he said had gained an international reputation as a "good credit risk", with high repayment rates and such reputation had made them a priority for poverty-oriented credit programme.

As for the earlier example of the power of "gender" at work, he said a solution would be to include husbands as co-participants, after undergoing a compulsory "gender sensitisation" programme.

So that together, the wife-and-husband team could scale up the micro enterprise as family enterprises, with equitable share of tasks and responsibilities in decision-making.

In his opening address, Dr Mahathir also touched on the importance of information communication technology (ICT) for rural women, whereby special strategies are needed to include rural women and especially young rural girls in computer literacy and skills training.

He said the Grameen Bank of Bangladesh, as a well established and leading micro-credit institution, has once again led the way to empower rural poor women with the use of ICT.

The Grameen Bank, he added, has provided basic communication infrastructure facilities such as the Grameen solar powered telephones and Grameen Internet.

In Malaysia, two pilot projects on computer literacy/Internet use, have been launched to educate rural women borrowers of the country's micro-credit institution, the Amanah Ikhtiar Malaysia. -- BERNAMA
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